

12 April 1968

NOTE TO THE DIRECTOR

Here is the paper on Vietnam; we think pretty well of it, for what it sets out to be. If you send it out I would recommend a buckslip somewhat as follows:

This paper describes in very broad terms the essential elements of the Vietnam situation as we see them on the eve of the expected meetings. Obviously it does not try to present a searching analysis, but it does set forth the principal conclusions of our continuing analysis of the situation, as they stand today.

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Director
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

12 April 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Some Factors Bearing on US/NVN Talks

General Considerations

1. Concerning many aspects of the situation in Vietnam there is lack of conclusive evidence and considerable room for honest disagreement. This applies, for instance, to the personnel strength of various types of Communist forces, the exact situation in the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam, the relationships between Generals Thieu and Ky, the real condition of the Communist forces, the influences which may be at work within the government of North Vietnam, and so on. Yet despite these various and important uncertainties the general outlines of the situation may be sketched with a fair degree of confidence, and it is the purpose of this short paper to do so, avoiding the difficulties which a detailed analysis presents.

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2. It has long been clear, and it still is clear, that US armed forces cannot be defeated and driven out of Vietnam by purely military action. The obvious superiority of American military power renders this impossible. But it has long been clear also that the Communists could not be defeated and driven out of South Vietnam by purely military means, save in a long-continued and costly conflict. They can maintain some scale of military action for a long time; their physical capabilities for occasional military initiatives on a major scale remain substantial. They receive adequate supplies from foreign sources; they have adequate manpower, numerically speaking, to meet all their foreseeable needs. Thus the contest, as has long been recognized, is essentially one of will rather than of military power in the narrowest sense.

3. The element of will is impossible to measure accurately. It fluctuates somewhat from time to time, on both sides. It rests importantly on the perceptions each side has of various factors: the ebb and flow of the military situation, the current and potential effectiveness of the governmental and social structure of South Vietnam, the effectiveness of the Communist organization within South Vietnam, public opinion within the United States and (to a much less degree) within North Vietnam, and so on. In addition

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

are peripheral considerations such as world opinion in general, the attitudes of the principal Communist governments, and even such things as the US balance of payments and the amount of domestic unrest within the United States. In the following paragraphs we examine very briefly the most important factors within Vietnam which bear on the situation.

The Military Situation

4. During the Tet holiday the Communists staged an offensive which had great impact at the time because of its widespread scope and vigorous execution. In strictly military terms this offensive was certainly no Communist victory; probably it should be judged on the contrary to have been a costly setback because of the extensive casualties suffered and the failure to hold any important center for a significant length of time. It was followed by a period of diminishing Communist military initiative; the withdrawal from Khe Sanh has been followed in recent days by disengagement in other sectors as well. The US and its allies have resumed offensive operations, greatly relieving in some parts of the country the pressure which existed during and after Tet.

5. For the moment at least, the military situation appears somewhat improved for the US and its allies. There is

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

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evidence in the testimony of Communist prisoners and defectors of sagging morale and straitened circumstances, especially among the forces which were besieging Khe Sanh. But there is also evidence of swift and substantial reinforcement from North Vietnam, and of capability to launch major attacks in several areas, for instance in the central highlands and against coastal towns in I and II Corps areas. There is no convincing reason to believe that the Communists cannot continue for a long time to conduct military operations on a harassing and damaging scale, and from time to time to make a major offensive effort. It is fairly certain that the physical capabilities of the Communists would gradually diminish if faced with continuing allied military effort over a long enough period, but it cannot be argued convincingly that this process would be swiftly decisive.

6. In making its decision to take up "contact" with the US, Hanoi probably acted in part from a preference to avoid large and long-continuing additional military costs if it could, though it was prepared to pay them if it had to. It apparently concluded that the President's move of March 31 offered an opportunity to add an element of political warfare to the purely military effort, a tactic it had always intended to pursue at some stage. It

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

follows that the current let-up in military activity is unlikely to persist throughout various phases of "contacts, talks, and negotiations". New military initiatives will probably be launched in a manner and at a moment calculated to give maximum support to diplomatic activity. Hanoi's aim in the new phase will be to combine political and military pressures in order to bring a breakdown of unity and will on the allied side.

The Political Situation in South Vietnam

7. The political weakness and administrative ineffectiveness of the South Vietnamese government remain important factors in the new phase. Yet that government is probably no worse off than before the Tet offensive, and in some respects may be in better condition. It coped with the circumstances of Tet fairly competently, the ARVN fought well and in some instances very well indeed, there were no major defections, no rallying of the people to the Communist cause. Neither was there evidence of enthusiastic rallying to the government side, on a significant scale. The government is dedicated to continuance of the struggle, and there is little important opposition on this score.

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

8. The majority of the population remains largely apathetic. We cannot be sure how far the Communists took effective control in those areas of the countryside from which government forces were withdrawn; we do know that government control was greatly diminished. The process of pacification was badly set back. To recover the ground lost, to get back to the pre-Tet situation, and to resume an advance, will almost certainly take a long time.

9. Within the government itself and those factional groups that matter, the most important influences in the near future will almost certainly be the mere fact that the US is meeting with representatives of North Vietnam, and the course of any talks that may develop. It is easy to predict that any considerable tendency to compromise by the US would be disruptive of the present governmental structure. If, however, Saigon is kept closely informed and is convinced that the US does not intend to make concessions which would give the NLF an effective claim to power, it will probably hold steady during the early stages of negotiations at least. Its confidence would be severely shaken, however, if it believed the US was discussing the terms of an eventual political settlement without its participation.

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

Hanoi's Approach to Negotiations

10. The most striking aspect of the current position of the North Vietnamese is their expressed willingness to meet with representatives of the US, reversing their previous refusal to do so before the cessation of all bombing. It can be argued that the Communists made this move because they felt their general position to be deteriorating sufficiently to require a retreat. Or it can be argued that they thought the position of the United States so weakened -- politically and psychologically rather than militarily -- that the time had come to shift to a political course in full expectation of substantial success, perhaps in the course of this election year.

11. Neither of these contentions can be proved at this moment, and it would be imprudent to adopt either without strong reservations and qualifications. Almost certainly the Communists find their military position and political standing in South Vietnam less improved by the Tet offensive than they had hoped; almost certainly, however, they have the capability for another major military initiative during the next weeks or months. They never believed that they could defeat the US by purely military means, but the habits of Communist thought, and their analysis

- 7 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

of the influence of French domestic politics on the conclusion of the French war, are such that they probably took the retirement of President Johnson as a signal of intention to back down rather than as an indication that he wished to achieve greater freedom in handling the war.

12. Hanoi's willingness for a meeting inaugurates a new phase of struggle. During this phase the Communists will endeavor to combine military, propaganda, and diplomatic actions in the most advantageous way for them. They will probably try to achieve two things: to maximize the hopes of the world for peace, thereby putting pressure on the US government and curtailing its room for diplomatic maneuver, and to maximize pressure on South Vietnam both by military action and by intensifying Saigon's mistrust of US purposes and methods in the search for peace.

13. Yet Hanoi is probably uncertain about the course of events in coming weeks, about the success of its plans, and about the tactics to be followed from day to day. Only the actual progress of negotiations will disclose its intentions more fully and at least by implication reveal something of its view of its own situation.

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- 8 -